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Ominous Ghosts in Moscow

What explains the frame-up that has landed Nicholas Daniloff, an American correspondent, in a Moscow jail amid dark talk of espionage? There are several possible answers but none speak well of the Soviet Government. The incident serves, rather, as an ominous reminder of how pendular may be the "openness" promised by Mikhail Gorbachev's new regime.

In two tours of duty in Moscow, Mr. Daniloff, an American of Russian ancestry, developed a wide circle of acquaintances. He was preparing to leave after five and a half years as correspondent for U.S. News & World Report when he received a call Saturday from one such acquaintance whom he had not seen in a year. Since Soviet citizens are actively discouraged from visiting foreigners' homes, Mr. Daniloff found nothing unusual in an invitation to stroll in the Lenin Hills or in the man's offer of a packet of newspaper clippings in exchange for a gift of some novels. Yet the moment he took the packet, Mr. Daniloff was seized by eight K.G.B. agents and told that it contained "top secret" maps and photographs. After 48 hours in jail he was told he would be charged as a spy, or released, within 10 days.

Perhaps the K.G.B. needed an innocent hostage to win the release of Gennadi Zakharov, a Soviet employee of the United Nations who was arrested Aug. 22 and held without bond on charges that he paid an F.B.I. informant for American secrets. His

hearing, in New York, is to be held in precisely 10 days.

If the K.G.B. acted against Mr. Daniloff on its own, it demonstrates alarming independence in a matter affecting relations with Americans. If it had the Politburo's approval, that is no less alarming a sign that its bureaucratic interests take precedence over diplomacy and decency. And if bargaining for the U.N. employee was not the cause, perhaps the Daniloff arrest was intended as an internal challenge to recent Soviet efforts to improve contacts with Americans.

Whatever the motive, the incident betrays a continuing ambivalence in Moscow. The same Foreign Ministry spokesman whose recent availability and relative candor had been celebrated by Western reporters was forced yesterday to perpetuate the lie about Mr. Daniloff's spying. Worse, he felt compelled to give a sinister interpretation to meetings in a public park. "Nobody forced him to go there," the spokesman said.

As deplorable as Mr. Daniloff's arrest is the message thus conveyed to Soviet citizens: Even innocent contact with foreigners will make you a target — or tool — of the K.G.B. This is not the first such frame-up of an American in Moscow, but not since Stalin's death in 1953 has the victim been thrown, even temporarily, into prison. Does Mr. Gorbachev really mean to summon up that ghost?